

News story: Maintaining our close ties with Slovakia

The UK and Slovakia share a great number of common interests, not least the thriving trade between our great nations and the security of our continent.

So my simple message, as I visit Bratislava today, is that our strong relationship will not diminish after the UK leaves the European Union following last summer's referendum.

For while we may be leaving the institutions of the EU, we are not turning our back on Europe. The UK intends to remain a good European and global citizen.

Our countries have both already achieved a huge amount together.

The UK is among the top five export destinations for Slovakia, and overall trade between our countries has grown by an impressive 30 per cent in the last two years alone.

We both have thriving automotive industries – Slovakia is a world leader in car production, with Volkswagen, Kia and Peugeot all manufacturing in the country.

And more recently, Jaguar Land Rover, one of Britain's best known multinational car manufacturers, announced a £1.2 billion investment in Slovakia to produce its latest Discovery model from 2018.

In fact, one in every seven cars made in Slovakia is sold to drivers in the UK.

Building on existing trade ties is important for both of us, and it won't be in anyone's interest to see barriers to trade erected between our two countries.

That is precisely why we are seeking a comprehensive new free trade agreement with the EU, that allows for the freest possible trade in goods and services between Britain and the EU's member states.

Of course, trade is not our only shared interest.

There are also around 90,000 Slovaks currently living in the UK and around 2,000 Brits living in Slovakia.

Nothing should change for either group after the UK leaves the EU – and indeed, we would have liked to have provided that guarantee with an agreement with the EU already.

It is only fair that those who have built lives for themselves abroad, and who are contributing to our economies, see their status secured as soon as

possible. So we want to reach agreement on this issue as a top priority once the formal negotiations over the UK's new partnership with the EU commence.

We also have a very strong interest in maintaining the security of Europe and protecting our citizens.

Whether implementing sanctions against Russia, sharing counter-terrorism intelligence or working to secure Europe's external border, we are committed to standing with our allies.

But we know we cannot do it alone. As members of NATO, we both understand the importance of collaboration on defence and security.

Solidarity is crucial and, in the face of growing concern about the threat to security across the continent, working together has never been so vital.

That is why we want to continue partnering closely with Slovakia's armed forces on land, sea and air, with your police and your intelligence community.

So as we look ahead to negotiations to leave the EU, we do so in the spirit of friendship and goodwill. We want to see the EU succeed politically, economically and socially, and that is in the UK's interests as much as it is that of EU member states.

We are seeking a new, positive partnership between the UK and the EU – one based on mutual values, trust, free trade and continued cooperation.